

‘Steady Rain’ at Guild Hall

By Kurt Wenzel

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Looking for a cure for the winter blues? Need a break from gray afternoons, bitter temperatures, cataclysmic nor'easters? From now until March 19, you can try Guild Hall's production of "A Steady Rain," a play about two police officers who morally collapse after inadvertently allowing a teenage boy to fall into the hands of a human cannibal.

No, really, it will help. I swear.

"A Steady Rain," a 2007 play by Keith Huff, is a tour de force for male actors. It features just two characters, Joey and Denny, Chicago policemen who have been friends since childhood. Though they work as partners, their lives couldn't be more different.

Joey is Irish, unmarried, and maintains a strong sense of decorum. Hoping to make detective, he follows police procedure to a T (he says "effing" for example, in place of its saltier alternative). Loneliness and the miseries of policing have taken their toll on him, however, and after a bout with alcoholism, he has become the nightly dinner guest of his friend Denny, who is trying to normalize Joey's life and keep him off the bottle.

Denny is a rough-hewn Italian, violent, foul-mouthed, and not averse to taking kickbacks from prostitutes or selling drugs taken from dealers during busts. Denny's nihilistic take on policing owes something to Harvey Keitel's "Bad Lieutenant," and he boasts a dog-eat-dog philosophy of Chicago street life that echoes the work of Frederic Nietzsche. This is not apparent at the beginning, where Denny presents himself as an affable family man who's trying to get Joey to settle down (later, the irony of this will become tragically apparent). Denny even brags about his being a "Nielsen family" — that is, a family chosen to have its TV-viewing monitored for ratings. But Denny's home life is a facade, and by the end of the play he will be cavorting with prostitutes and using opium.

Denny is portrayed by the actor Edward Kassar. Some may have seen Mr. Kassar in last year's Hamptons Theatre Company production of "Lost in Yonkers," where he charmed as the amiable gangster Uncle Louie. Here, he is asked to do something much darker, and he's more than up to the task. He seems perfectly at ease in the skin of Denny, who speaks in a working-class Italian accent and peppers his dialogue with schoolyard vulgarities and racial slurs. Is Denny really a racist, or is he just spiritually worn down by policing in a city besieged by drugs and violence? The play doesn't judge, and Mr. Kassar is so likeable in the part that we're almost ready to forgive his appalling transgressions.

And Joe Pallister, who plays Joey, once again displays an actor's rare gift for gravitas. Terrific as George in last year's local production "Of Mice and Men," Mr. Pallister lends Joey a quiet dignity that is a perfect foil to the verbose and colorful Denny.

Denny's is the showier role, and in the play's first half, Joey comes off as a kind of misanthropic tight-ass, a monk who seems absent of humor and basic sexuality. Then, slowly and quietly, Mr. Pallister transforms the character



Joe Pallister and Edward Kassar portray two Chicago policemen whose friendship is under stress in the play "Steady Rain," at Guild Hall through Sunday.

into something much more human, allowing us to understand Joey even as he moves in on Denny's wife and family. This actor's solid presence always seems to ground whatever production he is in, and this performance is no exception.

The conceit of "A Steady Rain" is that very little is dramatized; the play is essentially two dueling monologues where each character tells his version of the story in past tense, only occasionally interacting to dramatize the tale. It's as if the characters are in a courtroom, pleading their case to a jury they hope will exonerate, or at least forgive, them.

The intimate staging allows the actors to make direct eye contact with the audience. Occasionally an actor will even take an empty seat in the crowd, appealing point-blank to the theatergoer next to him. This lends the play a visceral intimacy. In the performance I attended, some in the audience were actually nodding along as the actors confronted them.

But make no mistake, the aptly titled "A Steady Rain" is bleak stuff. This is a drama that starts off gray and heads directly for midnight. By the end, the story will have covered infidelity, drug abuse, infanticide, and yes, cannibalism. Denny's moral disintegration is like something out of Aeschylus, and those theatergoers looking for redemption and uplift will instead leave shaken and disturbed.

But also exhilarated. To hear two men speak so honestly (most of the time) about their mistakes, and to have this executed by such sterling performers as Mr. Kassar and Mr. Pallister, offers what only top-notch drama can: Catharsis. Who among us couldn't use a dose?

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